

Political detainees in Saudi Arabia

The following note provides information on political detainees in Saudi Arabia.

Overview

- Saudi Arabia announced an end to its high-profile anti-corruption campaign on January 31, 2019.
- Saudi Arabia carried out the mass arrests, including of princes, current and former government officials, and prominent businessmen, on November 4, 2017, holding some for months at Riyadh's five-star Ritz Carlton Hotel and forcing them to turn over assets in exchange for their freedom outside of any recognised legal process.
- However, a number of high-profile individuals remain in detention without a clear legal basis.
- Recently leaked medical reports have detailed a pattern of abuse of political detainees, now thought to be in the number of 500 following a recent round of detentions.
- The reasons for their arrests vary, and in some cases, their alleged offences have not been published.
- Several human rights experts have warned that trying to contact family members of people in detention would pose serious risks to the family members living in Saudi Arabia.
- In March this year, the Kingdom carried out another [round of detentions](#) including over 300 Government officials as well as senior Royals such as Prince Ahmed bin Abdulaziz al-Saud, a brother of King Salman, and the monarch's nephew Prince Mohammed bin Nayef (MBN).
- In May 2020, [the Guardian](#) reported that over 20,000 members of the Huwaitat tribe face eviction to build a new city, Neom. Saudi authorities are also reported to have assassinated nine leading members of the tribe who had demonstrated against the forced eviction.
- In June 2020, a former high ranking official and an assistant to MBN who fled to Canada called on western governments to demand that Saudi Arabia release his children. It is reported that they are being used as hostages. "It's been three months and totally zero response from Saudi Arabia. We don't know whether they are dead or alive," another son, Khalid Aljabri, told the [Financial Times](#) about his sister and brother.
- In July 2020, Saad Aljabri, a former senior Saudi intelligence official, revealed that MBS attempted to have him assassinated in 2018. Canadian border security agents at the Ottawa airport intercepted the alleged Saudi hit team known as the Crown Prince's "Tiger Squad," which was carrying two bags of forensic tools and had experience in the cleanup of crime scenes.
- It was further reported in [Canadian media](#) that Canadian security services had been informed of a new attempted attack on Saad Aljabri, who lives at an undisclosed location in the Toronto region. As recently as May of this year, the Crown Prince and his advisers were overheard saying they planned "to send men to kill Dr Saad in Canada by 'land this time' –dispatching agents from the United States to travel across the border.

What was the outcome of the 2017 arrests?

- According to Saudi Arabi's official Saudi Press Agency (SPA):
 - Those not indicted on corruption charges have been released
 - 87 have agreed to settlements
 - 56 have been refused settlements because they face other criminal charges
 - Authorities have referred 8 others to the public prosecutor after they refused to settle.

- More than US\$107 billion retrieved to the state treasury in the form of real estate, companies, cash, and other assets.

Who has been released?

Those detained in November 2017 and subsequently released include:

- **Prince Alwaleed bin Talal**, chairman of Kingdom Holding Company;
- **Prince Miteb bin Abdullah**, former head of the Saudi National Guard;
- **Waleed al-Ibrahim**, former chairman of MBC Group; an
- **Other influential businessmen** – Saleh Kamel, Amr Dabbagh, and Mohammed Hussein al-Amoudi. Another former briefly detained minister, Ibrahim al-Assaf, was appointed foreign affairs minister in December. Bakr Binladen, former chairman of the Binladin Group, was temporarily released in unclear circumstances in January.

Senior political detainees who remain in detention

Those who remain in detention without clear legal status include

- **Prince Muhammad bin Nayef**; Known as MBN, he was the Former Crown Prince and Minister of Interior with very close ties to the West. He was arrested alongside his half-brother Nawaf and his uncle Ahmed bin Abdulaziz Al Saud and charged with treason on 6 March 2020. Prince Nayef was [detained with over 300 Government officials and other senior royals](#) including **Prince Ahmed bin Abdulaziz al-Saud**, a brother of King Salman. The detentions marked yet another crackdown by the de facto ruler crown prince Mohammed bin Salman, who has consolidated his reign with the imprisonment of prominent clerics and activists as well as princes and business elites.
- **Prince Turki bin Abdullah, the former governor of Riyadh and son of the late King Abdullah**; Remains in detention without charge. He is seen as a key political rival of MBS.
- **Prince Turki's associate Faisal al-Jarba**; the confidant of Prince Turki bin Abdullah, remains in detention without charge. [The Washington Post](#) reported that in June, the Jordanian authorities had detained al-Jarba in Amman, where he had fled to seek safety, and eventually drove him to the Saudi border and handed him over to Saudi authorities.
- **Prince Salman bin Abdulaziz bin Salman and his father, Prince Abdulaziz bin Salman bin Mohammad** - Prince Salman bin Abdulaziz and his father, both businessmen, have remained in detention without charge or trial since their arrests in January 2018. They are in al-Ha'ir Prison, south of Riyadh. Prince Salman bin Abdulaziz is married to a daughter of King Abdullah. Prince Salman believes he was detained in retaliation for his advocacy on behalf of his detained family members after the November arrests. The authorities did not freeze Prince Salman bin Abdulaziz or his father's assets or ask for financial settlements.
- **Former planning minister, Adel al-Fakieh**
- **Others still held under opaque circumstances include al-Fakieh and Prince Khalid bin Talal**

Human Rights Defenders and Activists

On March 31st 2019, the [Guardian published extracts from leaked medical reports](#), showing that political prisoners in Saudi Arabia are suffering from malnutrition, cuts, bruises and burns. The leaked medical reports are understood to have been prepared for the country's ruler, King Salman.

The medical reports contain recommendations including a potential pardon for all the prisoners, or at least early release for those with serious health problems. In almost all cases, the reports demanded the prisoners be urgently transferred from solitary confinement to a medical centre.

The men believed to have been examined include:

- **Adel Ahmad Banaemah** – Academic Scholar arrested during a campaign that lasted for four successive days and impacting around 27 Islamic scholars, preachers, writers, researchers and poets
- **Fahad Abdulaziz Al-Sunaidi** – Journalist - sentenced by the counter-terrorism court on 13 October 2015 to eight years in prison followed by an eight-year travel ban mainly for posting on Twitter. He was denied access to a lawyer throughout his detention and trial
- **Zuhair Kutbi** – a prominent Saudi Arabian writer, commentator and critic, was taken from his home in the city of Mecca on 15 July 2015 by members of the security forces. He was beaten during arrest and has been held in three different places, where he was interrogated. He has not yet been charged. Amnesty International believes it is likely that he was arrested because of comments he had made on 25 June 2015 on the TV show Fi al-Samim (To the Point), on the Rotana Khalijia satellite channel, in which he criticized political repression in Saudi Arabia and argued for reforms including transforming the country's political system into a constitutional monarchy
- **Abdulaziz Fawzan al-Fawzan** – A professor of comparative religious law at the Saudi Higher Institute of Justice. Fawzan was arrested after he spoke out against the arrests of other religious leaders in the country. The cleric, who has more than two million followers on Twitter, criticised the arrests of other imams and religious leaders in tweets posted on 15 and 16 July, in which he accused Saudi authorities of waging a “war on religion and values”.
- **Yasser Abdullah al-Ayyaf** – Human Rights Activist – ON July 31, 2018, State Security forces raided al-Ayyaf's home and took him away to an unknown location, without producing a warrant or charging him with an offence. Al-Ayyaf was an active human rights defender, especially defending prisoners of conscience and detainees who were not brought to trial or who remained in prison after having served their sentences. Al-Ayyaf made a showcase of his father, Abdullah al-Ayyaf, who spent more than ten years in Saudi jails and was held beyond the expiry of his term before eventually being released.

The women include:

- **Samar Mohammed Badawi** – A human rights activist who took legal action against the Ministry of Municipal and Rural Affairs and participated in the women driving campaign. She has been arrested several times and banned from travelling abroad to attend international Human Rights forums. Most recently, on July 30th 2018, she was arrested again. Following criticism and calls for Badawi's release on the part of the Canadian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Chrystia Freeland, Saudi Arabia expelled Canada's ambassador, and froze trade with Canada.
- **Hatoon Ajwad al-Fassi** – Women's rights activist and an associate professor of women's history at King Saud University in Saudi Arabia. Al-Fassi was active in the women's right to vote campaigns for the 2005 and 2011 municipal elections and was active in a similar campaign for the 2015 municipal elections. She was arrested in June 2018 as part of a crackdown on women's rights activists. In November 2018, while still in jail, she was awarded the MESA Academic Freedom Award for 2018.
- **Abeer Al-Namankany** – Distinguished researcher and consultant pediatric dentist, she developed a new standard for measuring patient anxiety and treating it with drug-free psychotherapy. She is also a social activist and a defender of women's and children's rights.

She was detained for sending a letter to Crown Prince Mohamed bin Salman demanding freedom of movement. In her letter, she reportedly demanded freedom to travel and for her daughter to join her at international conferences.

The remarks on detainees from the leaked medical reports include:

- *"The patient suffers from severe weight loss with continuous bloody vomiting. There are also a number of wounds and bruises scattered in several areas of the body"*
- *"There are also a number of visible injuries in the chest and lower back"*
- *"The patient must be transferred from solitary confinement to the specialised clinic for immediate treatment and further medical examinations"*
- *"The patient has difficulty walking because of a number of bruises visible on the legs area. A number of injuries are also visible on the forearm and lower back area. Malnutrition and obvious dryness on the skin"*
- *"The patient suffers from a number of bruises visible on the body, especially in the areas of back, abdomen and thighs. It also appears to be malnourished due to lack of eating and facial pallor and general weakness in the body"*
- *"The patient cannot move at all due to wounds in both legs as well as severe weakness in the body due to malnutrition and lack of fluids"*
- *"The patient suffers from severe burns throughout the body. Old wounds were not completely healed because of medical negligence"*
- *"The patient suffers from difficulty in movement due to severe malnutrition and general lack of fluids. There are also a number of bruises, wounds and sores throughout the body"*

On the 23rd of April 2019, [Saudi Arabia executed 37 citizens](#) across the country for alleged terrorism-related crimes, publicly pinning one of their headless bodies to a pole as a warning. The mass execution was the biggest in a single day in Saudi Arabia since January 2016, when 47 people were killed, including a prominent Shia cleric whose death prompted protests in Iran and the ransacking of the Saudi embassy in Tehran.

Those executed include 11 men convicted of spying for Iran, and at least 14 others who were convicted of violent offences related to participation in anti-government demonstrations in the country's restive Eastern Province between 2011 and 2012, according to Amnesty. One of the men was Abdulkareem al-Hawaj, who, according to Amnesty, was arrested at the age of 16 and convicted of offences related to his involvement in anti-government protests.

What we are asking for?

- **Proof of life for those detained** – In [March 12, 2018 New York Times](#) report said that 17 Ritz Carlton detainees required hospitalization for physical abuse, including Maj. Gen. Ali al-Qahtani, an aide to Prince Turki, who later died in custody. Following the murder of Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul last year, having proof of life would be hugely reassuring for both family members and human rights advocates.
- **Clarification on the specific charges for those still held** - International human rights law protects basic rights, including the right not to be arbitrarily detained. Any charges authorities bring must resemble recognizable crimes. At a minimum, those detained should be informed of the specific grounds for their arrest, be able to fairly and promptly contest their detention before an independent and impartial judge, have access to a lawyer and family members, and have their case periodically reviewed. Those detained in connection with an alleged crime should be promptly informed of any charges against them.

- **The release of individuals who are not being charged with a crime** - Holding detainees at unofficial detention centres also violates international standards. The United Nations Human Rights Committee, in its general comment on article seven of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), stated that "...provisions should be made for detainees to be held in places officially recognized as places of detention and for their names and places of detention, as well as for the names of persons responsible for their detention, to be kept in registers readily available and accessible to those concerned, including relatives and friends."
- **The release of frozen assets held illegally** – This was carried out in contravention of both international law and domestic Saudi law. Unless formal charges can be brought, all assets should be returned.

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